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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000555

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, P, D, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [CB](#)
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF COMMERCE DENIES DEFAMATION SUITS ARE
POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

REF: A. PHNOM PENH 489
[1](#)B. PHNOM PENH 410

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CAROL A. RODLEY FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: During an August 4 meeting with Senior Minister and Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh, the Ambassador expressed serious USG concerns about the recent attacks on freedom of speech and the constricting of political space in Cambodia, highlighting the resulting damage to Cambodia's international reputation and ability to attract foreign investment. The Senior Minister defended the Royal Government of Cambodia's (RGC) use of lawsuits as necessary, denying that lawsuits were politically motivated, and characterized the criticism of senior government leaders as irresponsible, malicious attacks of a personal nature. He cited Asian values to argue that defamation lawsuits in response to such criticism were appropriate and necessary for senior leaders to defend their integrity and honor. Acknowledging that Cambodia's democracy was imperfect after starting from scratch and with only 10 years of stability, he nevertheless cautioned that to speak out against the government's response would only encourage ill-intentioned critics. END SUMMARY.

Ambassador Highlights Consequences of Lawsuits

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador expressed her deep concern to the Senior Minister that the recent attacks constricting political freedom in Cambodia, such as the slate of defamation, disinformation, and incitement charges against opposition politicians, journalists, and private citizens, are adversely affecting Cambodia's international reputation and deter foreign investment. She explained that such actions send the wrong signals, creating a negative perception in Washington, D.C., that freedom of expression is under attack, which is undermining Cambodia's recent democratic gains. She noted the planned U.S. House of Representatives hearing on the human rights situation in Cambodia as one recent outcome of the perception that the government is taking aggressive action to silence its critics. She stressed that public figures need to be tolerant of legitimate, responsible criticism of the government and its policies and actions. While she stated that public figures should have thicker skin and be open to fair comment, she noted that there is a need for responsible journalism and told the Senior Minister that she has shared this message with members of the political opposition and civil society, urging them to avoid making personal, malicious, and knowingly false attacks.

Different Values When Honor and Integrity at Stake

[1](#)3. (C) The Senior Minister was extremely frank and candid in his response to the Ambassador's concerns. He stated that

while Cambodians share our democratic values, the U.S. should be more sympathetic to Cambodia's situation and put the country's achievements in the context of all the challenges that Cambodia has overcome in the recent past. He asserted that one "cannot have full-fledged democracy overnight." He stated that Cambodians do not share the negative international perception described by the Ambassador, as demonstrated by the increased popular support for the governing party in the 2008 election. He advised the Ambassador "not to be too impatient to make it all perfect," noting that Cambodia "started from scratch" after the Khmer Rouge and that it takes time to build democracy.

14. (C) He urged the Ambassador not to generalize the recent freedom of expression cases as "a new wave of political repression," arguing that these recent cases were not politically motivated but a necessary response to what he characterized as "cursing" an individual's integrity and honor. Asian values, he maintained, require a response to attacks against one's honor. He explained that the government had been extremely patient with outspoken criticism, particularly during the 2008 election campaign, but that these recent cases were "too much" and could no longer be ignored. He questioned if the opposition was able to attack the government, then why shouldn't the government be able to respond, stating that there "should be fair treatment for everybody." Cham Prasidh informed the Ambassador that he has also been a victim of a malicious attack, and spoke emotionally about a 2007 article alleging his involvement in an extramarital affair and accusing his wife of physically attacking his alleged mistress. He said that he won a defamation suit against the publisher of the

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story, which was forced to print a correction and ordered to pay a fine of 10 million riel (approx. USD 2,500).

Opposition: A Necessary Evil

15. (C) Cham Prasidh complained that the opposition "has nothing else to do" but launch public attacks against the government and prominent officials since losing popular support in the 2008 election. He asserted that these figures speak out only to attract international attention and to elicit financial contributions from overseas. In response to the planned House hearing, he complained that U.S. officials make judgments about Cambodia based only on news articles in the Western press without first-hand experience in the country. He argued that the government does not seek to destroy the political opposition, rather he described them as a "needed disease," necessary to prevent Cambodia's claim to being a multi-party democracy from ringing hollow.

16. (C) However, he noted growing disillusionment of Cambodian-Americans in the U.S. with Sam Rainsy and cautioned the Ambassador against giving "him too much importance." He described Sam Rainsy as "mentally sick" and intent on destroying Cambodia as part of a personal vendetta against the governing regime which he has harbored since 1962 when his father was killed and the rest of his family exiled. Cham Prasidh was also very candid in his criticism of Sam Rainsy's performance as Minister of Economy and Finance in the early 1990's, during which time Cham Prasidh was the Secretary of State at the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

Comment

17. (C) Normally calm and collected, Cham Prasidh was candid and at times emotional as he justified the government's response to recent criticism. His defense of the lawsuits presents a different take than that made in previous conversations with RGC officials (reftels), who stressed the need for stability and public order above all as justification for the attacks on freedom of expression. The

Senior Minister's own experience with a personal, malicious attack on himself and his wife has clearly affected his perception on this issue. Nevertheless, his characterization of the disputes as personal in nature and his impassioned defense of the importance of protecting one's honor and reputation add additional insight into the government's aggressive response to outspoken critics.

RODLEY